In the Goo

By Lt. John Dolby

It wasn't like this flight was my first solo: I had done solos in T-34s. Besides, I had someone sitting next to me in the TH-57B Jet Ranger. I was excited to test my skills with a copilot who wasn't a flight instructor. The Pensacola weather was the expected scattered thunderstorms as we took off from Whiting Field to fly course rules to Pace. I felt prepared for my first helo solo at HT-18.

The flight to Pace and the FAM maneuvers were going well. My copilot and I were comfortable not having an instructor in the cockpit with us. We ran through all our authorized solo maneuvers, then set down at Pace to figure out our game plan.

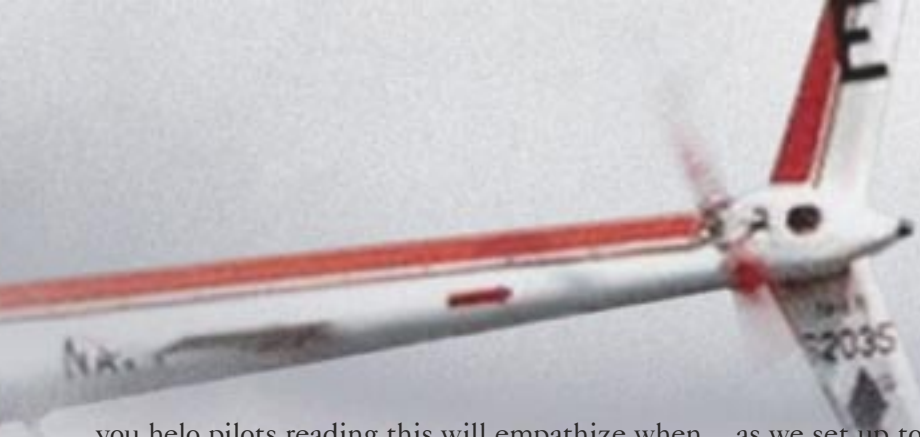
We looked around and realized the weather quickly was closing in around Pace. Anyone who went through flight school in P'cola knows that storms can pop up without warning. They tend to come in fast and hit hard.

After a quick chat on the radios with one of the instructors at the field, we agreed our best bet was to head home before the weather got too bad. There was no use ruining an otherwise perfect flight by getting stuck at Pace.

Before takeoff, we decided I would fly the course rules, while my copilot would handle the radios. We picked up course rules and quickly noticed the worsening weather. The prudent decision would have been to turn around immediately and head back to the field. Two students have no business flying course rules during a thunderstorm in a non-instrument-rated helicopter. Of course, if we had done the prudent thing, you wouldn't be reading this article.

Shortly after departing Pace, we picked up the road that would lead us home and started calling Whiting Tower. One call, no answer. Two calls, no answer. I was sitting in the left seat thinking, "I wonder if we have the right frequency in." So, logically (or illogically as a wiser and more experienced pilot now realizes), I looked down to help her troubleshoot the radios.

After what seemed like an eternity but really was five seconds, I looked up from the center console and couldn't see anything but rain. Despite being at 500 feet, we had no road beneath us to follow, no horizon, nothing. All



you helo pilots reading this will empathize when I say, "There are not many things out there more uncomfortable than the feeling of completely being IFR in a TH-57B."

For Pete's sake, the darned helo has a cardboard attitude gyro. As you leave Pace field, you must be careful to stay on the road because, on your left side, is Santa Rosa, another outlying field used by TH-57 pilots. So, there we were, IFR, in a bird that had no business flying in IFR conditions, with an unknown number of other helicopters somewhere to our left we couldn't see—great!

One of the PCL emergency procedures for the TH-57 is the emergency descent; now seemed like a good time to apply that procedure. We quickly needed to get back our ground reference. I lowered the collective and pushed the nose forward, so we wouldn't get slow—or so I thought.

Next thing I knew, my copilot called out, "Airspeed! Airspeed! Lower the nose!"

I looked down and saw that my emergency descent had turned into a 1,200-foot hover. Uh, oh!

I could hear the copilot calling, "Lower the nose," and I remembered thinking, "I am lowering the nose."

Vertigo is a scary thing when it hits you for real. I swear to this day I felt like I was nosing over and gaining airspeed. The gauges, however, told a different story. After realizing I was not coming around, my copilot pushed forward on the cyclic to get us much needed airspeed. Her movement seemed to bring me somewhat back into the game. I then lowered the nose and gained airspeed. Because we didn't know where we were, we made a descending turn to the right to avoid Santa Rosa. We popped out of the clouds over a farmer's field at about 400 feet.

We had made up our minds to set it down in the field and wait until the storm passed. But, as we set up to land, we saw we could skirt the storm and make it back to Pace, so we did. We landed at Pace, a bit shaken up but, otherwise, none the worse for wear. My copilot got on the radio and told an instructor the weather was too bad for us to make it back. The instructor told us to follow behind him at a quarter-mile, and he would bring us back. We followed him and landed at Whiting Field.

I learned a few important lessons that day. First, I never should have moved my concentration to the radios when I was flying the aircraft. The mantra holds true, "Aviate, navigate, communicate." Unfortunately, I failed to do the first two and, instead, decided my job was to help with the last one. Sharing duties is why helicopters are dual-piloted. I should have let my copilot figure out the radios while I maintained my VFR scan. If I had been concentrating on flying, I would have recognized we were flying directly into a cloud, and we could have turned to avoid it.

Second, vertigo can be completely overwhelming. I remembered feeling like I was pushing the cyclic forward when, in truth, I wasn't. Not until the other pilot came on the controls had I realized what was happening.

Finally, if all else fails, and you find yourself in a bad situation, don't overreact. Being in the "goo" in a TH-57B is not a good place to be, but being in the "goo" in a 1,200-foot hover in a TH-57B is a much worse place to be. I should have slowed down and concentrated on initiating a slow descent to get out of the clouds.

The TH-57B is not instrument rated, but it is not going to fall out of the sky just because you go IFR.

Nothing bad happened to us that day, but be assured the lessons learned remain in my mind on every pitch-black night when I transition to forward flight from the back of the ship.

Lt. Dolby flies with HSL-43